

What Do We Celebrate on The Fourth of July?

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT E. MERRY

Next Monday, the 4th of July, Duxbury will enjoy one of the greatest holiday parades of all New England. Town meeting has appropriated \$6800 for the celebration (in all my 6 years of retirement residence I have never heard a protest to this and like amounts for the occasion), with a number of bands playing, roughly 2 hours of passing floats, and thousands of people lining the streets along the parade route. It is quite an occasion. Duxburyites look forward to it every year and plan ahead to invite family and friends from far and near to come and share in this greatest community-wide effort of the calendar year. So what are we celebrating? The calendar marks this date as "Independence Day"; is it the date of our independence? Is this the reason for all this outpouring of patriotic zeal?

If it was truly "Independence Day," why was it not Dec. 9 when in 1775 an act of Congress broke off all allegiance to England; or May 10, 1776, when Congress sent word to all the 13 colonies to make "such forms of government as shall suit their own purposes," in defiance of the orders of the homeland. The French celebrate "Bastille Day," commonly called "Le Quatorze Juillet," as their national holiday, when the common people oppressed so long by the "ancient Regime" as Dickens called it, stormed the prison where so many of their families and friends had been incarcerated and often tortured. The Canadians celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday on May 24, and July 1 when Canada was granted Dominion status as a sovereign and independent nation. The Peoples Republic of China celebrates the achievement of victory over Chiang Kai Shek's forces and the beginning of a new nation on Oct. 1, 1949. The English celebrate several days, but the day of their patron saint, St. George, is April 23. So what are we celebrating, we Americans?

The date is July 4, 1776, so it could not be our independence from the Mother Country; this took place when we broke with England by an Act of Congress. Nor could it be our victory in war, for the turning point of the War of Independence was Oct. 17, 1777, the Battle of Saratoga, N.Y., or final victory at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown on Oct. 19, 1781. We know that for a few years following the end of hostilities in the Revolution we tried what we know in the history books as the "Articles of Confederation," but these were a total failure as a basis of government and Congress called a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia (the capital) on May 25, 1787, when the last of the required colonies (New Hampshire) had ratified it. A few historians claim that England never totally renounced sovereignty over America until the end of the War of 1812. Again it has been widely believed that the celebration is a commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence -- but this took place on July 2 when Jefferson submitted his manuscript with 2 principal changes, one omitting a reference to slavery for the Southerners, and another recognizing "Divine Providence," put in to placate the church establishments of Anglicanism in Virginia and Puritanism in Massachusetts. So where does that leave us?

Parades in Duxbury (on July 4 and on the scale we are now used to) are really a recent innovation, dating specifically from the gigantic celebration of several days on the 300th anniversary of the town's incorporation in 1937. Yes, there was a big parade on July 4, 1919, welcoming back the soldiers and sailors who had fought and returned after World War I. (Town meeting minutes of March 8, 1919 record an appropriation of \$500 to be used in honor of our returning soldiers and sailors, but this was a one-time thing, and was dropped immediately until the Tercentenary celebration.) Up to this date big parades were reserved for Memorial Day. The first of these took place in 1865 as nearly as can be determined when the 300 young men who had enlisted in the Civil War returned home. A parade was held with a band, and focused on memorial prayers and addresses honoring those who had died in that war, and dedicating appropriate war memorials, one of which was given by Ezra Weston II and stands at the right of the main entrance to Mayflower Cemetery. From that day on Memorial

Day parades were held with large crowds from the town joining in; first the returning Grand Army veterans, then their sons and the veterans of the Spanish American War, all sponsored by these veterans' organizations, as our present exercises are led and planned by the American Legion. An interesting touch to Ezra Weston's monument was his refusal to tag the war either the "Civil War" as northerners called it, or "The War Between the States" as some Southerners called it, but simply "The War -- 1861-1865." Annual Town Meeting minutes repeat the article that appeared in the Town Warrant of April 7, 1879, "Moneys to the amount of \$50 (or \$30 or so) to be appropriated and given to William Wadsworth Post 111 of the Grand Army of the Republic to honor our war dead on Decoration Day," as it was then called. My own recollections as a teenager in the late teens and early twenties of this century center around these Memorial Day parades and war veteran memorial exercises. Our present attention to them is limited to the gracious offerings of the American Legion at all the several locations where servicemen are buried, and includes a modest assemblage of a few hundred people, as far more attention is now given to July 4.

My recollections of the 4th of July celebrations of those days are colored by the fact that my father was then and for many years as old-timers in town remember, chief of the fire department. He and the firemen of that day were up all night on July 3 and 4 racing to the various fires that wild-eyed younger people had set all over town. Pranks like moving Paul Peterson's drugstore sign to the lawn of the Sears sisters boarding house across from our place on Washington St. -- a common trick was to remove pasture gates so cows and other animals would be free to roam the streets and frighten the residents. By far the greatest prank -- one for all time occurred on the night of July 3, 1920. This was the burning to the water line of Parker Hall's lumber schooner, the George R. Smith, off the end of what is now Bumpus Park. Parker Hall was a town "character" and an incorrigible stammerer, taking a whole minute to say even the simplest sentence. He lived, when at home, in a tiny cottage near the Washington St. end of Cove St., and followed the sea in sailing vessels all his life. I recall vividly the afternoon in late September at high tide seeing this ship in full sail (in later years after the death of his wife he sailed along, relying on steam engine hoists to raise and lower sails and anchor) come into the bay past Bug Light and grounding where we can still see the remnants of her keel and beams. Selectmen had been after him to pay a rather sizable tax bill but hard times had forced him to cut back and as he climbed out of his dinghy on Powder Point that afternoon he said, "Tell the selectmen there's my tax money -- take it or leave it." I remember well town kids, including the Merrys, crossing the ice, leaping from cake to cake at low tide to climb

aboard that ship to play hide and seek on this relic of a bygone age. So it happened on this famous night, and some few participants of the escapade are still here but most have left the planet, Duxbury's firefighters stood rooted to earth with no way to get to the illfated vessel and as flames shot skyward even the youngest of us knew that a great age had now come to a violent end.

About this time, plagued by these and other dangers to life and property, town citizens organized sports contests on Train Field. I remember what we used to call "semi-pro baseball," which held its final wind-up on this day. There was a bandstand that stood where Alden School stands now and often town bands would play as we participated in these contests -- running races, sack races, etc. with some water sports held at the Cove. One of the latter was a race between young people paddling laundry washtubs!

Our present rather expansive celebration of July 4 took its present format from the Tercentenary Celebration. The Town Report of that year (1937) is filled with the records of committee meetings, planning sessions, nature and type of floats, dates and times and locations of fireworks, and addresses of prominent national statesmen on the meaning of the period of celebration. It took 5 days in all. There was a letter from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, fresh from his overwhelming victory over Alfred Landon. The remarkable thing about this parade is that it was led by the Firemen's Band. This band, and the department itself, had become known all over New England for its skill and versatility (the following year they were asked to lead the parade over Sagamore Bridge and the Cape Cod Canal), and so ever since this day, their descendants in the form of the fire engines of the town have led the parade.

Following the Tercentenary celebration, Duxbury had what came to be called "Duxbury Days" and involved a week-long period of fireworks, bonfires, and festivities with concessionaires erecting a ferris wheel, booths for ring-tossing, etc. These days were sponsored by the American Legion assisted by Rotary and Kiwanis clubs and brought much notoriety to the town and no little income for charity. But things began to get out of hand, as I recall reading in the *Clipper*, and many concerned citizens raised questions about the propriety of encouraging some of the events peopled largely by "outsiders" and the town property at Train Field was requisitioned for a new school complex. So after 2 attempts to breathe life into a dying cause by holding the festivities at Bay Farm field, plus the new law against open burning, this particular type of celebration had to be abandoned. What's a celebration without a bonfire?

The past several years since World War II, we have held a mammoth parade, and we work for it, and plan for it, and we are proud of it and grateful indeed to those who keep it within the reasonable limits of a valid celebration. There are many floats and we'll enjoy them all, but alas, this year the "hit of the show" so to speak will not be seen. I refer of course to the "horribles" -- those rolling conglomerations of engine, wheel, frame, seats and roof that young people have ususally spent much time on -- will not be seen this year, the order from the Registry of Motor Vehicles who maintain that any vehicle moving on a public highway must pass

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inspection, testing emissions, lights, horn, brakes, etc., and no horrible that is able to enjoy the name could ever do this. That is the point of the "Horrible." Also eliminated is this delightful device to defuse youthful exuberance and channel it into controllable directions. I fear that if we can't have the "horribles" in the parade, we'll soon be back to the burning of the George R. Smith. (At this writing there are strenuous efforts being made by those in charge to reverse the decision, but the outcome is still uncertain.)

So we are now back to the original question. What do we celebrate on the 4th of July? We have enumerated several probable dates and events that might have been chosen for our national holiday, and now after much research and some thought I can state that we are celebrating the Announcement of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence -- that is what we are celebrating. Is it worth celebrating? Wouldn't it have been better to have a battle or a discovery or the birthday of a national hero for our great day as a nation? How did it happen that we are celebrating this, of all things?

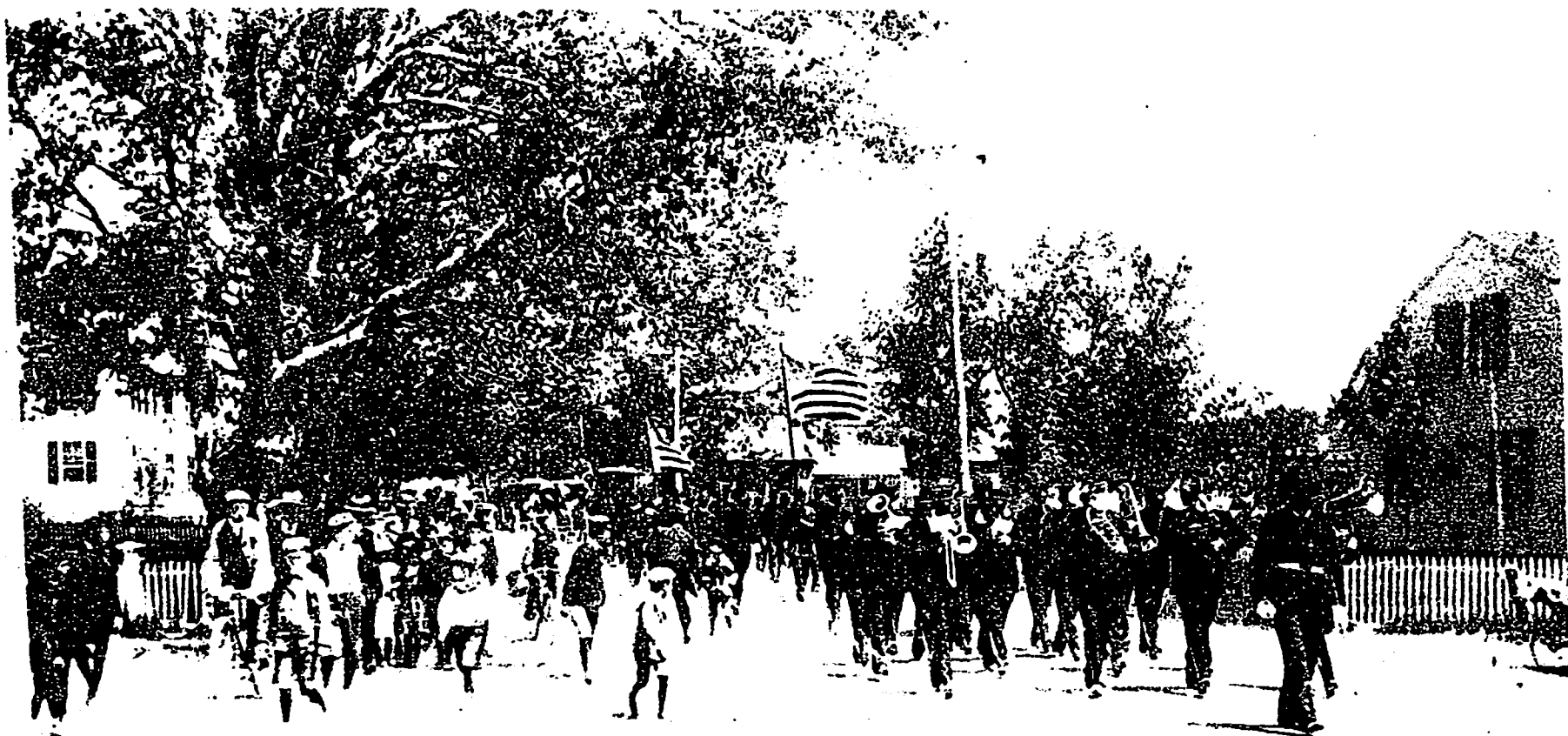
According to my best information it was Abraham Lincoln who made the choice, and others soon backed him up. As in his Gettysburg Address, he distilled into a few sentences the aim and goal of America, and so by setting this as our national holiday, he placed these sentiments in front of our national thinking. I have asked several really knowledgeable people what we are celebrating with all this fanfare on July 4, and only a very few among them knew. (Dr. Henry Ziebereck, curriculum director of DHS knew, but he has a graduate degree in American history.) Most of them said, "No, we never realized that." So I wish we could have a new course in American history, stressing the essence of our nationhood, which has never been better stated than by Theodore White in his book on the Watergate conspiracy, "Breach of Faith":

"But America is different. It is the only peaceful, multi-racial civilization in the world. Its people come from such diverse heritages of religion, tongue, habit, fatherhood, color and folk song that if America did not exist it would be impossible to imagine that such a gathering of alien strains could ever behave like a nation. Such a stewpot civilization might be possible for city-states -- a Tangier, a Singapore, a Trieste. But for so mixed a society to extend over a continent, to master the most complicated industrial structure the world has ever known, to create a state that has spread its power all around the globe -- that would be impossible unless its people were bound together by a common faith. Take away that faith, and America

would be a sad geographical expression where whites killed, blacks killed whites, where Protestants, Catholics, and Jews made of their cities a constellation of Belfasts; where each community within the whole would harden into jangling, clashing contentions of prejudices and interests that could only be governed by police. Politics in America is the binding secular religion; and that religion begins with the founding faith of the Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"

This is what we are celebrating. We are celebrating the unfolding before all the world a banner of faith that humankind can govern themselves, and regardless of differences, serve the common goal of mutual help in the seeking of the good life. We are celebrating the hope that this goal may be held before all the world, that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall become the law of nations all over this globe, and it is to this we dedicate ourselves, our lives and our sacred honor, as have our forefathers before us.

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Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, June 30, 1983



Probably the July 4 parade in 1919 (note World War I uniforms and the G.A.R. veteran
marshalling the procession).
Courtesy Duxbury Fire Department